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Schools chief: Laptops to go on

By **Lindsay Tice**, Staff Writer

Wednesday, December 28, 2005

Laptop timeline:

Maine's middle school laptop program will live beyond its initial four-year run, the education commissioner says, even though she doesn't yet have the official OK that pays for it.

The education department hopes to sign a new four-year laptop deal that will allow the program to continue without pause. The department will go out to bid in January.

If there is no winning bidder, Education Commissioner Susan Gendron plans to extend the current four-year Apple lease agreement for another year.

It would cost the state about \$8 million to continue the Apple contract as is, Gendron said. It would cost \$10 million to sign a similar agreement for a year but replace all 34,000 laptops with new machines.

"We think it's a wiser investment to do the replacement," Gendron said. "Some of the laptops are now five years old."

Gendron earmarked \$10 million for laptops in her \$1.8 billion education budget. She presented that request to the State Board of Education earlier this month.

She'll still need legislative approval for the expense, she said. A vote won't come until the session resumes next year.

Gendron is so optimistic, though, that she detailed her plans last week in a letter to superintendents. When a new contract is awarded, she told them, they'll be able to buy their old laptops for \$48 each.



On Tuesday, Gendron called the laptop program "critical" to Maine's future. She and other education officials said the laptop program has proven successful since 2002, when it put portable computers in the hands of all public middle school students and their teachers. Schools have lauded the laptops for invigorating the classroom and giving students

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Sue Gendron

up-to-date information. Dozens of states and countries have looked to Maine for advice on starting programs of their own.

"It struck a cord globally," said Jeff Mao, education technology coordinator for the education department. "We're doing exactly the work we need to be doing."

Maine has a \$37 million contract with Apple. That contract ends in June.

Nearly 240 schools are involved in the laptop program this year. If the program ended, Mao said, "I think we'd have a revolt on our hands from many of the teachers."

In Lewiston, life with 900 laptops hasn't been so loving.

Students dropped them, especially at the beginning. The batteries have had to be recharged every day. The school has had to find a place to store them and technicians to work on them.

But despite the added expense and trouble, Superintendent Leon Levesque said the laptops have opened a world of opportunities to his students and staff.

He would like to see the program continue.

"I think it would be a step backward if it didn't," he said.

- March 2000: Gov. Angus King announces a plan to give all middle school students and teachers a portable computer. He wanted to fund the program with a \$50 million endowment.
- April 2001: Legislature authorizes a scaled back version of King's laptop program.
- January 2002: Maine signs four-year, \$37 million lease agreement with Apple. Students can use the machines, but they must relinquish them at the end of each school year.
- March 2002: Nine schools pilot the program, including Auburn Middle School.
- September 2002: More than 17,000 laptops are delivered to seventh-graders and their teachers.
- Summer 2003: More than 17,000 laptops are delivered to eighth-graders and their teachers.
- June 2004: The state strikes a deal with Apple for a discount on laptops for high schools. Although the state pays for the middle school laptops, school systems must pay for the high school machines. Only 31 of the state's 158 high schools sign up.
- December 2005: Maine Department of Education officials tell schools the laptop program will continue beyond its initial four-year run.



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